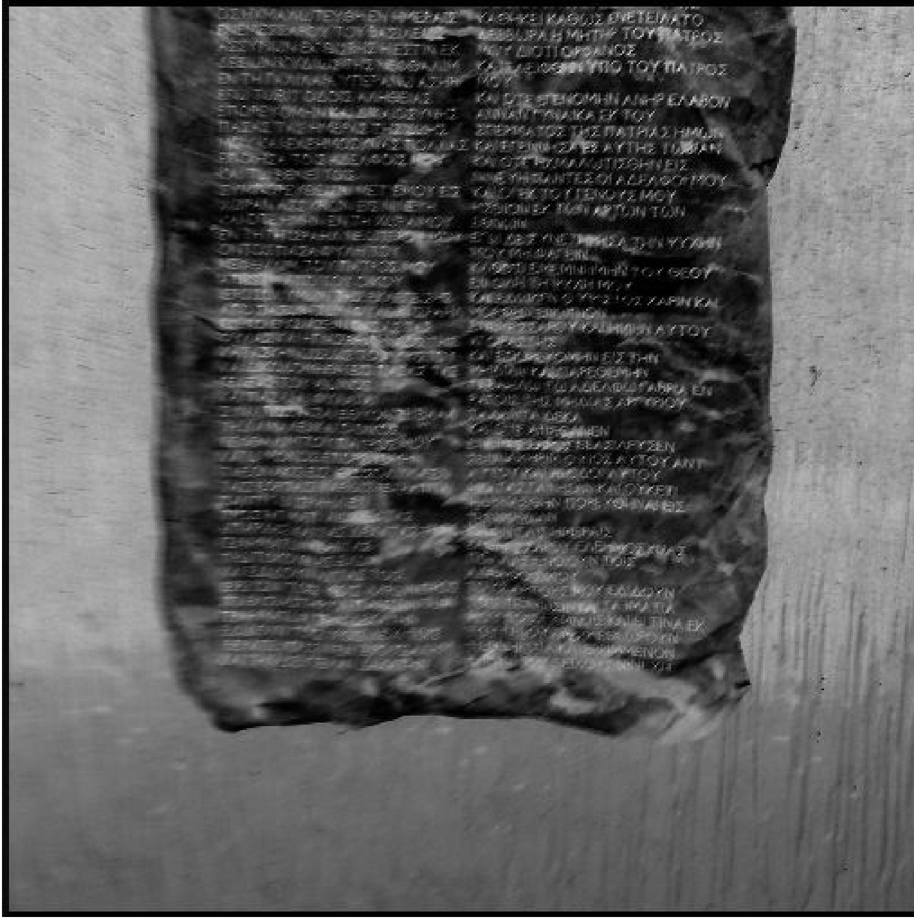
The Book of Asmodeus

by Mordechai Lazarus



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The Book of Asmodeus
(Being a tale of the formless spirit Asmodaios in his own words, proclaiming the true events of his love.)

The Book of the words of Asmodeus, son of rage, son of lust, child of strife, offspring of nobody, and all that sort of thing.

Ah, what a fine thing it is for a poor spirit like me to have my own words, my own story, even if it is written on the wind and nobody will pay any attention to what a despised creature like me has to say! Who would think it, me, who has flown from pole to pole on this ancient earth, who creeps through the thoughts of men from kings to beggars, who has been drawn to all places and all times - apparently my story isn't good enough. No, it'll be the words of the human beings that last. What a ridiculous state of affairs. Most of them know almost nothing, never travel beyond their stinking little village, and it's all that they can do to live out a few years trying to avoid accidentally falling onto something sharp and dying. But no, their words count, not mine. I am too insubstantial to matter in the grand narrative of things, and to be perfectly frank, I'm sick of it. I've worked hard, done the jobs nature formed me for, no matter how unpleasant they were, and never complained. I may not be one of the golden boys, but that should not make me any less of a worthy spirit, should it? But no, they sneer and spit at my thought and call me demon and I can live with that, it all goes with the territory. What I can't forgive, however, are the damn stupid stories they smear me with. Pox upon the stories of humans! You don't see me trying to go around making up nasty rubbish that will live on for generation after generation, do you, ugly nicknames and mocking stories that haunt a spirit, ey? For Tumult's sake, they can't even decide what I'm called - Asmodaios they call me, and Hashmeda, and Shamdon, and Sidona, and Aeshma Daeva. Well, if you all say so. No, I know my place. Usually I do. Is it such a terrible thing that for a brief moment I wanted more? All those of the real and the solid world, they don't understand what it is like to be a spirit.

"Fie, Asmodaios!" you say, "Why dost thou complaineth, thou low demon? Here thou art, an eternal spirit, able to change form and waft about all the kingdoms upon the earth, playing merrily and unseen in the affairs of mankind!"

Of course, it isn't anything like as pleasant as all that, you see. The people don't know how lucky they are - to be real and defined and solid! Oh, how I dream of it! Imagine that, waking up in the morning and stretching your arms and knowing that your hands will be right there at the end! Never wondering if you are a bull or a snake or smoke or flame today! We spirits are so insubstantial, so formless - even those smug brothers and sisters the people call angels. And of course, we have no choice in what we do - we are our duties and no more. So you see, you may curse me and the priests and magicians may shake their fists at me and repel me with their mumbo-jumbo, but I assure you, I am not evil, any more than a sword is evil or a bolt of lightning. I have no say in what I do, I am but a poor spirit drawn to human lust and conflict. Often I think I only exist out of human thought - the real people dreamed me up into existence to haunt the kingdoms, just as they dreamed up the supposed guardian spirits and all the tricksters. I do harm because the people dream me doing so. That's why I can't stand the smug arrogance of the so-called

angels. They are no more inherently good than I am evil. Like me, they are just spirits directed by the messy will of all that lives. It is only People who can really be good or evil, you see, because they choose what they do. What I would give to have such a choice! The one and only time I tried to find a little something for myself, I get vilified! Oh, when I first saw her there, so real, so constant in her form! I thought - is it so bad if I let myself be in love, just this once?

But no, they all conspired against me, refusing to let me have a small, brief happiness -

"Why, this is simply how all things are, Asmodeus, for ever and ever, Amen!"

I refused to accept that! I may be a spirit, but why shouldn't I love?

I remember the first time I saw her. I had been drawn to a Greek village by some petty feud - it isn't always fancy dramatic stuff in my line of work, you know - and once I'd arranged that all nicely by tweaking things here and there and creeping about to put everything just as they imagined they wanted it to be deep down, I was enjoying a moment's peace as I drifted along the hot currents, just stretching out and admiring the view of the world going on beneath me. But there's no rest for the wicked, as the real people say (or will say, I'm not so good with time) and just when I've got my eye on appreciating the aesthetics of some local monuments, I'm pulled away again. There's no point in complaining, of course, that's just how things are when you are a spirit put to work, there's never a moment to relax and think for yourself.

So I'm blown like a leaf in a storm through the sky and the dust on the ground and before you know it I'm in some other kingdom. I flittered through the streets and the market so that I can get a quick sense of where I am. Bouncing off the voices of a greengrocer and a home-furnishing salesman who are competing to out-shout each other, I quickly learned I'm in the land of Media. That doesn't mean too much to me. I'm not so hot on geography because it's all kind of a big blur to me. Like in every town, there's a big chatty crowd around the market. Besides the vocal traders, there are women in drab clothes hustling jars of water and trays of food about the place, old men lounging in the shade, chickens squawking, youngsters squabbling and playing and generally getting in the way, and several donkeys, all of which appear to be lazily crapping all over the place. Besides the surface noise of the Medians, I also get an ear full of their strongest thoughts. When you've got a bunch of real people together like this, you get a kind of statistical average of what is going on inside their heads that echoes about the place. There's some overall excitement about an event today, I hear, and all their talk and thought shakes through me and I found myself squeezed into the shape of a bug. I crawl up on top of a fountain in the centre of the market to see what's what. Everybody is pointing to a house near the market - a big place, they say, that is owned by a wealthy local called Raguel.

The man himself comes out the front of his home with his wife fussing about him.

"Edna, stop that, will you? We're in front of everybody!" he said in a reedy voice. Raguel is a nervous, thin, weak-looking fellow, with a beard that curls into a kind of question mark at the end. His wife Edna ignored him and turned his hat around, which in his excitement Raguel has put on back-to-front.

"Now, don't get excited, Raggy," Edna chided him, straightening her

husband's robes, "You know how bad that is for your poor little heart."

Edna was a well-dressed lady, her clothes made of expensive silks. She had the class and poise that her hubbie lacked.

"This is a big day, Edna," said Raguel, "Oh, no wonder I'm all muddled!"

His wife patted him soothingly.

"Go on, Raggy, make the announcement," she cooed.

Raguel cleared his throat and waved his hands about to attract the attention of the crowd gathered in front of his house.

"Excuse me! Excuse me everybody!" he said, but his voice was too weak to be heard over the noise. Several young men made jokes about Raguel, calling him stuff like the "'Old Shaking Money Bags" and "Wonky Beard". Raguel pressed on.

"I wish to make an announcement, please everybody, about my daughter!" he said with a strained voice.

"Go on then, stop dancing about the place and announce!" said one wag in the crowd, "Don't be so nervous, Old Shakes!" cried out another, "It isn't like you are giving birth to her a second time!" shouted another. There's lots of loud guffawing at this sort of thing.

"If we may have you attention, please, ladies and gentlemen!" Edna booms so loudly that the front of the crowd almost falls over. She immediately resumed the part of the demure wife.

"Go on, dear," she said coaxingly to her husband, who looked even more startled by his wife's shouting. Raguel twisted his fingers in his beard.

"Oh, yes, thank you, dear, Yes, where was I?" he said, "Oh, yes, ladies and gentleman, my wife and I have been blessed not only with all the success and wealth that heaven can bestow, um- "

"Lucky for some!" interrupted one of the crowd, but Edna glared in the direction of the outburst and silenced that rowdy section with a look.

"Yes, what was I saying?" Raguel went on, "Ah, we are thankful for all the wealth we have been fortunate enough to have been bestowed with, but by far our prize and greatest jewel is our only child, our daughter, Sara. We are overjoyed to announce that our most treasured and dutiful child is now of marriageable age, and in fulfilment of the commands and obligations laid upon us by the divine power, we wish to announce that my wife and myself now welcome worthy and, um, appropriate suitors to take our Sara as wife."

At this point, Raguel gestured towards the balcony of his home. Nothing happened, besides someone in the crowd whispering "Money Bags has lost her already!" and a smattering of giggling.

"Nanny!" Edna roared and a sour-faced maidservant shuffled onto the balcony, looking disapproving at the riff-raff who had come for a gawk at the debutante daughter. The maidservant gave a curt command to someone behind her and out came Sara, daughter of Edna and Raguel. I crawled closer, mesmerised.

By the Stars and Suns. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I could hear some off-colour comments in the uglier sections of the crowds and a few young men whistled and clapped. Immediately I felt the rising tide of lust and leering competition emanating from the Medians. This was the force that had brought me, yet here I was, gazing upon an example of human perfection! The Nanny scowled at the raucous crowd and shuffled Sara back inside.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" the lemon faced servant woman

hissed at the crowd, to be met with obscenities and jeers that tugged at the edges of my shape. But I wasn't interested in any of that.

I was in love.

"Asmodeus," you scoff, "You've been too long in the sun. A spirit, in love? Don't be absurd! Does mud drying on your sandals fall in love, or the belch of a man who has drunk himself into a stupor? Can the shadow on an ass feel love in it's heart? Ha ha! How comical! How absurd!"

Well, Plague and Rot upon thee, say I! Why shouldn't I be allowed to love? I knew that it was so from the first moment I perceived her, that my love was the only true, sure and unshakeable thing within me. Scoff away - it makes no difference to me.

I scooched up into the house of Raguel and Edna, slipped unseen past the watchful Nanny and circled about this wondrous Sara.

How happy a spirit I would be to do nothing but watch her as she brushed her hair. What joy it gave me when she washed her face or sang softly to herself! Never was there a more perfect example of beauty and symmetry! She would nod politely as her Nanny droned on about duty and morality and when I was near her I almost felt as wondrously firm and real as the earth itself. Happily I would have spent my remaining days dancing invisibly between her dainty fingers, tickling at those shapely ears, or merely hanging upon her every breath, but it was not to be. Such kindness is too much of a big ask for the world to provide Asmodaios.

Soon the men came. Suitors they called themselves- hah! Not a one of them was worthy of the love of Sara, no matter how they boasted of their hollow achievements. Poor foolish Raguel didn't really have the smarts to see beyond the surface, and was relieved at the idea he could soon stop worrying about his jewel being unmarried and could move on to whatever next anxiety seized him. Edna also looked forward to the day they thought was not far off, when Sara's hypothetical husband would bring glory and honour and other such human nonsense to the family. Sara, for her part, oh sweet, firm Sara, Sara simply bowed her head and smiled. It was in her nature to bend herself to her parents' demands, without a second thought for herself. How poorly they treated this treasure, I thought to myself, who was far too good for any mortal in all of Media.

The Soldier was the first to arrive and present his case. He was quite the local celebrity for a battle he had won the year before, where he had single-handedly killed twenty of the enemy. And they call me a thing of destruction! All armour and muscles, the Soldier was, and thought a worthy man by the town because of his generalship and general facility at smashing other people to bits in the name of one cause or another. Now, I will be the first to admit that I didn't like his looks and his swagger, or the way he insisted on constantly whipping out his sword and flashing it about the place, but for what I did next I had good reason.

One night the Soldier came unto my beloved Sara, and came unto her just a little bit too hard, if you ask me. The man was a brute - he bruised at her skin as he pawed her and held her fine neck in one of his meaty hands, slowly squeezing just for the sheer pleasure of power it gave him. When even Sara's endurance was so strained by his violence and the way he crushed her for amusement, she gave out a little cry, and I could stand it no more. I rushed into the Soldier's coarse form and set him alight from the inside, melting those muscles and sinews he was so proud of until he collapsed in a choking feeble puddle on the floor.

Naturally, the whole incident was upsetting for Sara, but it was all for the best. It is my business to know disruption and destruction, and I could read that the Soldier would have beaten Sara every day of their hellish marriage until he had a mind to kill her for his own blood-thirst, and the whole town would have believed whatever story he would concoct about her death simply because he looked so imposing in his armour, and because he was too fearsome a specimen for them to contradict.

Well, of course, the death of the soldier did poor Raguel's nerves no good, but Edna soothed him and explained that it was simply one of those inexplicable spontaneous deaths of divine providence.

The next unworthy they decided to hand their pearl of perfection to was a Merchant. He was a grotesque flabby thing, who wore each of his extra chins as a badge of pride and success. When he looked at my love, he saw nothing but a commodity - he forced Sara to walk up and down as he eyed her greedily and inspected her as he would some cattle at the market. He told her, quite openly, that she was nothing to him, and that he merely desired access to Raguel's wealth. The Merchant only wanted to suck the house of Raguel dry, to bankrupt Sara's parents and leave them destitute in the dust to swell his own greed, as he had done to so many of his poor victims before. And when he was done, he chuckled, he would have to find himself another girl that would allow him to devour another family. Even in the face of this monster, Sara was full of obedient love for her parents, for all their flaws, but even she looked with horror at this parasite. From the despair in her eyes, I could see that she knew that there was no way she could possibly convince Raguel and Edna that the Merchant was a danger to their old age. Her Mum and Dad were stuck in their ways, y'see. Sara's only hope was me. So, as the Merchant laughed and stuffed his face with figs and dates and other dainties, I withered him from inside his great belly outwards with an unquenchable fire, and he fell to the ground, consumed, with his last meal still smeared on his fat lips.

Again, Edna mumbled something about spontaneous combustion and told Raguel that perhaps the death of the Merchant was all for the best, and again they cast their net to find their daughter a husband.

Next came the Judge, a man of position and influence in the city, with a venerable demeanour and a honeyed voice. He easily talked his way into Sara's chamber. Raguel and Edna were rich, but not the brightest sparks on earth, and they were no match for his rhetorical skill. Besides, Sara's parents thought, it was well known that many of the citizens owed this imposing politician favours, and they reasoned that a man of that sort of power would do great honour to their family name. I've never seen the appeal of great honour myself, but each to their own, I suppose.

Again Sara bowed her head in obedience to her parent's wishes, but I could see the whole truth of the Judge. That man may not have had blood upon his hands, but he had blood upon his tongue, and I saw that he had unjustly sentenced many an innocent enemy of his to death for daring to resist or displease him. So, when this orator came to my love, I filled his mouth and throat with a thousand stings, until he too fell down dead, his tongue bloated and his eyes staring wildly.

The Nanny consoled Sara, and Edna reasoned with Raguel that the Judge had not been a young man, after all, and perhaps had been taken from the earth in his own due time. Raguel, that nervous man of duty, had taken on the obligation of burying each of the fallen suitors with all the honour he could afford. In the meantime, Sara's sour-faced Nanny, a

lunatic zealot if ever there was one, dropped none-too-subtle hints that it was the opinion of the moralisers of Media that losing one husband was unfortunate, two was tragic, but three looked far too much like carelessness, or worse, sinfulness. Despite this atmosphere of suspicion and condemnation, kind, faithful and constant Sara, who was far beyond these lowly worms in mind and body, continued to think of nothing but bringing her parents happiness and cried herself to sleep, not knowing that I had only taken these cruel measures to keep my love from such base and unkind marriages. Can you imagine how much it cut me up to watch her cry, when all I wanted to do was hold and comfort her? If only I could summon up hands that didn't waver and change!

It was amongst all this uncertainty that Raguel and Edna next accepted the Athlete as their prospective son-in-law, a man who was thought to be as beautiful and radiant as a god, at least by human standards. He had a bright smile and flowing locks, not to mention a tanned sculpted body that he would show off at any given opportunity. But I saw his vanity, and I saw even far worse than vanity within him. When he went to force himself on my beautiful Sara, it was clear that while he had been blessed with a share of human beauty, he had made use of that to sleep with any person he could find to satisfy his unending lust and vanity. Because the Athlete had stuck his reproductive organs wherever he could, this suitor was filled with every sexually transmitted disease you could imagine. The worst part was that I could see that he knew himself how pox-ridden he was, but the strutting narcissist still longed to make Sara his next conquest and to infect her without any regard to her own health. As you might imagine, I wouldn't stand for that, not in a damn month of Sundays. Furious, I became a snake just as he lay on top of Sara, hungry to infect her, and I crushed his offensive rotting member. Unfortunately, he did not survive the experience, and died screaming in agony and clutching his putrid junk. Ah well. I felt no regret.

My love, however, was most distraught at all this, and I could not stand the sight of her weeping in the corner as her Nanny stomped about wringing her hands and muttering nonsensical prayers and telling Sara that she was cursed. Cursed! Can you imagine? I'd never met anyone quite so wondrous as that young woman! How could you consider her as anything but perfection? Why, the very way that, even as her eyes were wet, she held her small chin up as a show of strength in the face of Nanny's insinuations, any fool could see that the idea of any flaw in her existence was patently absurd! At the same time, it made me terribly depressed to think that she misunderstood my actions. So, one night when the Nanny had fallen asleep muttering counter-curses and liturgies, I decided I would try to explain things to my beloved. With an intense effort of will, I tried to assume a human shape, a tricky matter for a formless thing of chaos like myself. First I found myself becoming a pig with bat ears, then a two-headed monkey - oh, it was like wrestling with wind, but finally I became something that at least looked vaguely human. I wasn't going to win any beauty contests in my current form - I was tall, pale, and skeletal, with no lips to speak of, and one eye was green and the other blue. My love stared in terror at me, speechless. Oh, it wounded me, it really did!

"Wait, my darling!" I whispered and waved my long ridiculous fingers to try and stop her from hyperventilating. My voice in this form sounded like the erratic piping of someone playing a flute with their nose.

"What manner of creature are you that afflicts me?" Sara said.

"My name is Asmodeus, my love, and I am a spirit who loves nothing so much in the world as you - everything I've done, I've done for you!" I said, "And, honest, it's not just for your looks. I love you for your character too, dear Sara, I swear it, not like those poor excuses for men your parents have tried to foist on you. Now, listen, I know this is a little unusual and unsettling, but let me explain why I had to get rid of those monsters who were invited into your bedroom-"

Unfortunately, before I could get another word out, the Nanny woke up and goggled at me.

"Hell is empty, and all the devils are here!" the Nanny screamed, or anyway, something hysterical like that. I tried to calm everyone down, but the Nanny started babbling exorcism tosh at me, and was throwing pots at my form. I managed to duck the first missile, but the second hit me square in the head and I couldn't keep that thin shape together any longer. Like a sigh in a gale, I dissolved away in disappointment.

Perhaps you think I'm a fool. "Asmodeus, you crazed spirit," you say, "That wasn't handled very well, was it?"

Be fair, all you critics, I don't exactly have a lot of experience with this sort of thing, do I? I was bound to make a few mis-steps along the way, and even if I hadn't got the chance to properly explain things, at least I had told my love one of my names, and that was a start, wasn't it? I refused to let myself get down in the dumps about this.

As you can imagine, word quickly got out about my hanging around, which made poor old Raguel twist his beard more than he ever had before, while Edna took to stress-eating. News about me was soon spread to the rest of the town, too, but it was all twisted and misrepresented, which perhaps made the slanderous reports of demons haunting Sara and preying on any man who approached her spread even faster. Typical! Rumour gathers force as it goes, after all, and people never let the truth get in the way of a good sensationalist story.

In this atmosphere of overreaction, Edna and Raguel were overjoyed at the offer of the Preacher who declared that he was holy enough to marry Sara, and that he had no fear of any demons, for he walketh with the divine word and all that sort of guff. Actually, he walked with a slight limp, since his favourite position for preaching was sitting comfortably and nibbling at these little cakes his followers presented him with. He was no spring chicken, either, but I swear by Void and Strife that it wasn't my fault he wound up dead. I never laid a finger on him, and you can stop looking so sceptical, it's a very nasty attitude to have, thank you very much. No, it transpired that the devout Nanny had a strong difference of theological opinion with the Preacher. I think the Nanny's cult believed that the divine was in everything, while the Preacher declared that it was only revealed in the words of humanity, although I may have got that backwards. Just between us, I suspect that there may have been more to the history between the Nanny and the Preacher, a bad break-up or something like that. Anyway, she would glare hate-daggers at the Preacher as he sat there showing off some of his sermons to Sara, and unable to tolerate the thought of having to serve in a household under that heretic, as she called him, she poisoned one of his little cakes, so that he keeled over half way through a boring speech to Sara about the moral obligations of a married woman.

Look, you don't have to believe me, but that's what happened. Not everything is my fault.

Raguel got the late Preacher into the ground as quickly as he could, and Edna managed to find a Philosopher who was willing to be next in line. The Philosopher was a moody, sallow chap, who wasn't in the best of health, despite still being a young man. It was all that depressing overthinking that kept him so unhealthy, if you ask me. He needed to get out into the sun and have a bit of fun occasionally. The Philosopher was given to long periods of staring sadly into space, thinking his deep thoughts, leaving poor Sara with nothing to do but wait patiently for him to open his mouth. I took advantage of one of his interminable reflections to try and appear to Sara again, figuring I'd have another crack at explaining myself to my beloved.

Unfortunately, I ended up taking the form of a flaming bull, and when the Philosopher turned and caught sight of me, his poor withered scholarly heart couldn't take the strain, and made a burping noise and just stopped.

Raguel was getting pretty good at grave digging by now, and I'd imagine all that exercise was probably a useful outlet for his nervous energy.

Edna managed to find time between stuffing her face and chewing her nails to dig up a Farmer as a potential husband. He was a guy who owned a whole bunch of land all around Media, and was one of the major producers of crops in the area. For some reason, Edna considered him a little vulgar, but I never really had anything much against the fellow, besides his not really being worthy of my beloved. The Farmer was a big jolly fellow with a sunburned face, who liked nothing more than a good drink and a party. That was what ended up doing him in. He was there in Sara's room, celebrating the occasion and having a real good booze-up. Sara sipped daintily at the wine the Farmer insisted she try (it came from some of his own vineyards) and the big guy really got into the spirit of things, chugging cup after cup of wine and trying to make the Nanny dance with him. The Farmer was pretty sloshed after a few hours and he was prancing about and singing songs at the top of his voice, slopping wine everywhere as he twirled, and because he wasn't the most graceful of people, he ended up doing a tricky inebriated two-step thing and fell out the second-story window.

Look, stop it. I had nothing to do with that one either. Of course I didn't push him. Why would you even think that?

At this point Edna and Raguel were losing their minds. They could have learned a lot from the poise of my beloved, who took this all in her stride.

I thought that finally I would get the chance to have some quality time with my precious. Foolish Asmodaios, to think that you would be allowed the smallest grain of happiness! It's always the way, isn't it? Why can't the world just leave me be? Just when I felt myself as light and cheerful as a spring breeze, I sensed the far off workings of a fellow spirit against me.

I rushed off to see who it could be, and ended up in Nineveh, at the house of a pious old fuddy-duddy called Tobit, who had wound up going blind when some birds crapped in his eyes. Honestly, you can't make this stuff up. Tobit had a young son called Tobias, who always had a dumb smile on his face and nothing going on inside his noggin. They were just people, of course, and I was sure that the opposition I sensed came from a less substantial opponent. But who was the spirit who was plotting against my happiness? Who do you think? It's always him. None other than the one who is called Raphael, of course. Ugh, Rot upon him! He's no better

than I am, that Raphael, but the airs he gives himself! Calling himself an angel, when all he does is the job he has no choice in! I disrupt things and Raphael crams them together - how does that make him more stinking splendid than me? I can tell you straight, he's done as much harm to human life as I have.

Raphael is admittedly much better at person-forms than I am, and was disguised as a human called Azariah, who had offered to bring the idiot boy to Media to marry my beloved. The prick. Even in that shape, you couldn't mistake Raphael. He always looks like a smug family doctor in any manifestation. He's honestly arrogant enough to think that he does some good in the world and that self-satisfied smile shines through no matter what he looks like. The nerve of him!

Well, while my old colleague was talking to blind Tobit and his wife and the boy, the Quack Raphael looked straight at me with that cockiness I'd seen a hundred times before when we'd come into competition.

I was anxious, I must admit. I don't have a great track-record against that holier-than-thou meddler.

Off Raphael or Azariah went, shepherding the baby-faced ninny from Nineveh with his mangy mutt on their stupid little adventure. I nervously hovered about to see if I could do anything to delay them, but that rotten dog, when it wasn't running around trying to eat every piece of rubbish it found, kept on barking and growling at me if I got anywhere near the boy. That'd get the Quack's attention and he'd look at me like I didn't have a damn chance.

Maybe you think I'm being unkind about the boy Tobias, but this little dummy was so green that he almost got himself eaten by a fish when he went splashing in the river Tigris. How could anyone who is barely a match for a thing that can't even breathe on land make for a good husband? It wasn't even that big a fish, but the Quack shouted out directions to the boy like a wrestling coach, and by some damn miracle, the kid managed to get a hit or two at the poor fin-head and dragged it onto the ground where it died before it ever had a chance to nibble any more at him. The Dummy's stupid smile was even wider after this, like he'd done something heroic. "Fish will think twice in the future!", the juvenile cretin declared, while his mutt ran around him yapping with excitement. The Quack solemnly informed the kid that this particular fish he had valiantly asphyxiated had magical guts that could do all sorts of things, including curing his dad's crap-induced blindness. What a load of nonsense. If you ask me, and I don't pretend to be a clever-clogs doctor like Raphael, old Tobit's blindness was probably mostly in his head anyway, out of the humiliating embarrassment of being known now as the guy with bird shit in his eyes.

I tried all sorts of things to stop their little expedition, from summoning up a terrifying storm, to giving the saphead Tobias a horrible cold, but between the efforts of the Quack and that noisy dog, they always drove me away before I could get anything done. There was no hope for me as the obnoxious party moved closer and closer to my beloved.

In the end, I ran out of tricks to keep them out of Media, and before you knew it, the chuckle-gang was at Sara's house. I was very down, I can assure you. The only laugh I got was when they showed up and Raguel was in such a state that he started digging a grave for the Kid as soon as he laid eyes on him.

Pappa Rags was jumping the gun a bit, unfortunately, because the Kid

and the Quack started doing some mumbo-jumbo with that same so-called magic fish, filling my love's room with so much smoke that every time I tried to keep close to darling Sara, my flimsy formlessness was all blown about and mixed up with the billowing burned fish stink, until I could hardly hold myself together at all, and while the Quack smirked at me, I was blown right out the window.

Well, the Quack, who never passes up a chance to kick someone when they are down, dropped his human guise as Azariah and came flying after me, chasing and knocking me all the way out into Egypt.

"You lose again, foul demon!" Raphael said pompously.

"Yeah, well you're still an arse, Raph," I replied, "All I wanted was to be near her, but you couldn't even let me have that, could you?"

"Base creature," he intoned, "I bind thee so that thou cannot continue thy evil works!"

Maybe in a fair fight, I could have taken him, but I was full of fish smoke, and when I had my back turned, he beat me into the ground and waltzed off to go do some more of his smug-arsed works.

I was trapped right in the dirt now, deep down under the soil, and I was wriggling and twitching into different shapes, but even someone like me with a poor sense of time knew that it would be decades before I got free, by which time my beloved will be locked into marital servitude with that drippy Kid. She may have even grown old and turned to bones by the time I get out, and I know I'll never see her again, and it tears me up inside. But just this once, I wanted someone to hear my side of the story.

You don't have to believe me, but there it all is. The Quack may have taken my beloved away from me, but I'm always going to love her, and there's nothing the jerk can do about that. And that intangible affection inside me is the realest thing I have.